

La Saint-Jean-Baptiste: Catholic Discourse
and the Search for National Identity

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I should like to begin my presentation this morning by talking about two cartoons. Of course, I don't mean Bugs Bunny or Donald Duck or even Tintin. The two cartoons I refer to appeared in newspapers in recent months, and they both feature imagery related to saint Jean-Baptiste himself. The first comes from Voir in March of this year, at the time when Jean Charest was elected Québec Liberal leader. It shows Charest in a business suit, covered by sheepskin. He has very curly hair (of course!), holds a shepherd's staff in one hand, and, rather than a lamb, a partisan of the Liberal Party under the other arm. The caption reads: "Jean John, le nouveau St-Jean-Baptiste." The second cartoon appeared some months later in Le Devoir, on June 19th to be exact, at about the time William Johnson was elected President of Alliance Québec, the English rights group. Johnson is standing on a child's wagon, dressed in a shepherd's tunic, with a staff in one hand, and a wig of curly hair on his head tied under his chin. Rather than holding a lamb, he has a beaver in his arms. The caption reads: "Saint Bill Johnson the Baptist."

These images certainly say something significant about the persistence and relevance of religious symbols in these very secular times. What I find particularly interesting,

however, is the manner in which the figure of the Baptist is used to make a political statement, and how this figure has assumed certain messianic or redemptive overtones. The message of these cartoons is quite clear: both Charest and Johnson, through their leadership, will “save” their respective constituencies. They each become the embodiment of a certain ideal of political consensus and renaissance. What is equally fascinating is the elasticity of the symbol of Jean-Baptiste. Sainly attributes that would have been almost sacrilegious only a few short decades ago -- the business suit, the beaver, the wig -- are now introduced as part of the acceptable visual discourse. All of which goes to show that John the Baptist still manages to speak with relevance and authority to Québec society -- though one must surely be careful about delineating the exact source of this authority, for there can be no guarantee that it remains, at heart, a religious one.

Our period is from 1840 to 1960, from the post-Rebellion years of religious revival to the onslaught of the so-called Quiet Revolution. Though these are somewhat artificial parameters -- as are, in fact, most historical dates -- it is clear that they were chosen in order to highlight the critical era of clerical ascendancy and influence in Québec society. These dates, however, are perfect for my purpose. They cover the exact period during which la Fête de la saint-Jean was most tied into the clerical and religious discourse dominating Québec nationalism, and when the feast attained institutional form as a cultural display of collective purpose. When you consider that the celebrations of June 24th were revived in 1843 in Montréal following the defeat of the Patriotes and that they continued fairly uninterrupted until 1969, with Pierre Trudeau’s famous election-eve

encounter with the supporters of Québec independence, you will appreciate why they are, by sheer force of their longevity, an important factor in understanding the history of contemporary Québec. They reflect the forces and contradictions of this history, its discourses and its personages, its popular imagery and its more elitist tendencies.

In this paper, I propose to take a look at the Saint-Jean-Baptiste celebrations as the locus for the display – and the resolution -- of a series of dynamic tensions at work in Québec society during the 120-year period under consideration: between religion and nationalism, between different social classes, between Church and State, and even between differing forms of religiosity. I want to outline some salient themes and suggest some interesting avenues for further investigation, rather than undertaking a detailed historical analysis. I posit that these celebrations were the occasion for the visible, public demonstration of the Catholic discourse on national purpose and meaning. As such, they serve to inform our understanding of how Roman Catholicism contributed to the elaboration of “the politics of Québec identity,” as our theme for this colloque would suggest. But first, I must do a bit of sociology, and talk briefly about the social role of a feast.

Ethnography and sociology have had much to say about the meaning and purpose of collective celebrations. Very often taking their clue from Emile Durkheim’s concept of “effervescent social environments,” they have sometimes emphasized the manner in which these celebrations serve to re-enforce the influence of the communal over the individual, and how they can act as a source of integrative moral power. Examples are

the various public or civic festivities marking important national and historical events in the life of a people, including our very own Fête nationale here in Québec. Another perspective emphasizes the subversive quality of popular celebrations and feasts — how these provide opportunities for the cathartic release of social frustrations stemming from such variables as the class structure or economic injustice. In this perspective, the feast is the occasion for the critique and reversal of social roles — the better, of course, to ensure their subsequent and authoritative re-affirmation and re-integration. One can think here of the mediaeval Feast of Fools and the more contemporary carnival.

An equally important view argues that the feast and the public celebration are the occasion for the expression and the affirmation of identity — more specifically, that the person or persons celebrating are, in fact, that which is being celebrated. This is consistent with the thinking of Durkheim, who considered the social and the religious to be co-extensive, one and the same. French sociologist of religion François-André Isambert expresses it in the following words: “En célébrant un objet, le groupe en arrive à se célébrer lui-même. Le cas le plus clair est ici celui des fêtes patronales: la fête du saint patron est dite en même temps fête de celui dont il est le patron, qu’il soit individu, ville ou corporation.” One could well add: “....qu’il soit aussi groupe national ou pays,” for the applicability of the identity model to la Saint-Jean-Baptiste is certainly more than obvious in this case.

A feast — and more specifically a parade — is very much like a culture on display. It is a culture showing and interpreting itself to itself and to the outsider. It does so by using

shorthand, that is, by putting forward a complex array of symbols, gestures and images which — at one and the same time — help to decipher the culture in question, yet sanctify and reify its contours and its boundaries. I would argue that the social function of the parade is primarily integrative. It is meant to ensure social harmony and to support the consolidation of common cultural values, including religious ones.

You will have understood by now that this is how I see the celebrations and the parades of June 24th. I would submit that, in their long and sometimes precarious and stormy history, these have provided an invaluable and continued source of inspiration for the elaboration and the consolidation of a French Canadian identity initially, and a Québécois identity more recently. I would also argue that this was done — not at the expense of inherent social, political or religious tensions and contradictions — but by a process of their very transformation and resolution. How, you may ask, was this done? I would suggest three possible avenues for our consideration: first, by the manner in which religion and nationalism, and therefore Church and State, were brought together; second, by the blurring of social classes and modes of religiosity; and third, in the central figure and symbol of the parade, saint Jean-Baptiste himself.

La Saint-Jean-Baptiste, from 1843 to the late 1950s, was structured by, and consequently drew its meaning from, the traditional Catholic discourse of cultural and religious hegemony. It must be remembered that for some eighty years, from 1843 to 1924, the year of the introduction of the first thematic parade in the streets of Montréal, celebrations of June 24th centered on a mass and a religious procession which had Notre-

Dame Basilica in Old Montréal as its backdrop. The Roman Catholic hierarchy clearly acted as the dominant voice during this time, for the celebrations were explicitly religious in both content and, by implication, purpose. It was only natural, therefore, that, with the arrival of the more popular and public parades, this influence should continue fairly unabated and unchecked. During this period, and especially during the heyday of ultramontanism, the Church certainly was the dominant powerbroker of Québec nationalism. Though it is quite important to understand that the Church's position was not as absolute as is so often assumed, and that it did encounter challenges to its authority, some very critical, it remains that Catholicism provided the normative cultural paradigm. The celebrations of la Saint-Jean — and especially the parade, their most staged, dramatic and overtly nationalist component — would certainly be perceived and used as another significant forum, if not the most significant one, for the manifestation of a triumphant Catholic discourse of social order and religious unity.

Processions and public displays of Catholic fervour were a staple of French Canadian religiosity: everything from la Fête-Dieu, to expressions of Marian piety and devotions to the Sacred Heart, to grandiose Eucharistic Congresses. These public rites were very visible expressions of the close affinity between the Church and the secular order. Though these feasts were primarily religious in character, the trappings of secular power were also very much in evidence. The message being communicated was unmistakable: that the Church and the nation were one, each sustaining and nurturing the other. More often than not, the Church was portrayed and accepted as the more important of the two spheres of authority.

This cultural dynamic was “copied onto” the events marking la Saint-Jean. Church and nation were symbiotic: religion and nationalism supported each other. As a matter of fact, the message was pushed one step further. It was Catholicism which was the guardian and the guarantor of national identity — of “la race” — and of its most sensitive yet prominent component, language. The parade, as a performative and theatrical manifestation, signified and “made real” the two different types of public power: the political and the religious. Processions, parades and the like provide a space for the objectification of power, where a particular interpretation of it is revealed as normative. By testifying to a unitary vision of religious and civic power, la Saint-Jean-Baptiste, in its multiplicity of events, could be said to have made possible a collective sense of unity which embraced two potentially opposing poles of identity. It strengthened the emergence of a public political discourse, which just happened to be couched in the language and symbolism of religious cohesion.

La Fête de la Saint-Jean-Baptiste acted as a powerful and significant focus for the integration, not only of nationalism and religion in Québec, but also of the disparities between social classes, most particularly between the clerico-nationalist elite and the larger masses of people. Popular forms of religiosity were fused with clerical interpretations of the Feast, though popular culture remained an important and distinctive trait of the festivities. National celebrations are the reflection of a collective purpose and specificity. What makes them different from other types of feasts, whether strictly religious, familial or personal, is that they mirror and expound loyalties to a national

community — not so much in terms of a nation per se, but rather as an elemental, experiential locus of identity. In his famous essay on civil religion in America, Robert Bellah writes: “....the American civil religion is not the worship of the American nation but an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality.” Such feasts, in other words, are designed to transcend difference and to enhance cohesion. They propose an other-worldly and immutable sense of national purpose. National feasts are also richly layered in terms of religious and pseudo-religious symbols and rituals. Formal or institutional forms of religiosity are prominent (such as blessings for the welfare of the nation), but so are more diffused and popular configurations of religious expression (such as parties or other festive gatherings).

There were, in fact, two ways of celebrating la Saint-Jean: the first was the official, symbolically dense one of the mass, the parade, the receptions, the banquet and the speeches; the second was more popular, associated primarily with the arrival of summer, with water and the sun, with bonfires, picnics and fireworks. Yet this was one Saint-Jean, and only one message was being communicated. La Fête reaffirmed the ethnic and cultural bonds which united French Canadians. Everything about the public and highly ritualistic aspects of the celebrations was infused with this political message, which also carried strong religious overtones -- whether it was the case of a priest delivering a sermon extolling the virtues of large Catholic families, or that of a parade float illustrating the heroic deeds of the founders of New France. A second important way, therefore, in which la Saint-Jean-Baptiste contributed to the emergence of “the politics of Québec identity” was precisely through the blurring of difference, whether it be class-

based or, in a more subtle yet interestingly subversive way, in the unspoken rivalry between clerics and the large mass of people with their own understandings of religious efficacy and belief.

Finally, there is the figure at the centre of all this — saint Jean-Baptiste himself. It is important to mention, first of all, that, as compared to some relatively minor saints in Roman Catholic hagiography — such as Saint Philomena or even Saint Ann, for example — there never was a real devotional cult of John the Baptist in French Canada. This indicates that he was primarily a political and cultural icon as opposed to a strictly religious one.

In 1866, the first representation of John the Baptist as a young child was introduced in the procession. Consistent with the aesthetic and artistic canons of the time, he is pre-pubescent and curly-haired (blond, of course), clothed in the traditional ascetic garb of the Saint, and accompanied by a lamb, symbol of Christ. In the early 1940s, an older child or young adolescent began to be used. This slight change of imagery could be interpreted as symbolic of the sorts of changes which were on the verge of erupting in Québec society, since adolescence represents a transitional stage of development. This adolescent Baptist embodied the contradictions and challenges of modernism in what was still, relatively speaking, a closed, traditional society, but one which would soon be altered radically and quite dramatically.

The last large-scale, traditional parade in Montréal was held in 1969. In this particular parade, the Baptist was represented in the form of a large papier mâché statue. This was a year of passionate political and linguistic conflict in Québec, and the parade became the public stage for the acting out of these tensions. The float bearing the statue was seized by demonstrators in front of the Ritz Carlton Hotel, turned over, and literally decapitated. I need not comment on the symbolic appropriateness, from a scriptural as well as a cultural viewpoint, of decapitation, if only to say that it was perhaps more meaningful than the demonstrators themselves realized at the time, since it heralded the last such event.

In the historical period under consideration, the symbolic association between the character of John the Baptist and that of French Canada was something deliberately constructed by the Catholic Church. Many of the biblical attributes of the Saint, and of his role in Christian history, whether these be missionary zeal, sobriety and moderation, self-effacement, religious rectitude, material indifference, moral uprightness or Christian ardour, were portrayed as component parts of the French Canadian identity and purpose. In the gospel according to Saint John, John the Baptist is a witness, the precursor “come to speak for the light,” “the voice of one crying in the wilderness.” Time and again, these images would be used by the Catholic clergy to fashion a destiny for French Canada, most notably at the time of the massive emigrations to the New England states. This destiny, this calling, was a spiritual and a providential one: among all nations and peoples, French Canada was chosen, like the Baptist, to bring the light of Catholic Christianity to the New World, to be the precursor of a fully Christian (that is, Catholic)

social order. A Catholic French Canada was the bridge between a godless (that is, Protestant and capitalist) society and a true Christian one in North America, much as John the Baptist himself was the link between the Old and the New Testaments, between the ancient order and the new dispensation. Fundamentally, such a vision was a form of ideological compensation for the position of economic inferiority in which French Canadians found themselves. It is therefore perhaps more than simply coincidental that John the Baptist, another of whose attributes was his complete disregard for material comfort and gain, should have been chosen as patron. The symbol of the Saint was not only a strikingly apt one from the Church's perspective; it was almost a national archetype in terms of its political economy.

Regardless of how saint Jean-Baptiste may have been portrayed — whether in terms of what I have just described, or in the different guises of a cute, immature child, a moody adolescent, a stern adult, or a hollow doll made of newspaper and glue — he did embody the special place of a special people at a special time in its history. He did help this people cope with its unique position of relative economic, cultural and political uncertainty. The icon of the Baptist was concerned with survival; it held the promise of better times; it served as a model of collective purpose and identity; and it dynamically bridged past and future. And when this same people cheered their Saint in the parade, they were cheering themselves. Childish or not, hollow or not, it remained a living icon. I am not sure if one can ask for more — or for better — from any symbol, especially a religious one.

In many cultures, a feast is associated with a sense of transcendence, of time and history surpassed, recalled and exalted. Individuals break away from routine activity, and social relations become more fluid and less structured. Collective meanings are reaffirmed. Precisely because it is concerned with the sacred — with that which is transcendent — religion has a catalytic effect on the elaboration and structuring of human celebratory rituals. An essential element of the make-up of such rituals is the sense of collective dépassement which they impart. All this was certainly found in la Fête de la Saint-Jean, as it still is found today.

From a sociological perspective, however, the fundamental purpose of a feast, at least in its modern sense, is not so much to undermine or radically transform a society, as it is to provide a sort of safety-valve for the release of potentially disruptive forces at work within it. In so doing, feasts can ensure a smooth integration and absorption of these forces, the better to reinforce the social edifice and the power relations which underlie it. Equally important, the feast is the source for the public emergence and affirmation of a collective identity. Religion and the feast are therefore functionally quite similar. Each is a call to transcendence, and this transcendence is itself a factor in the creation and the maintenance of social stability and cohesion.

I would submit, in conclusion, that Québec political culture, as both a dynamic process of change and the expression of a collective purpose and identity, owes much to la Saint-Jean-Baptiste, which has served to transform social contradictions into political gains, and religious discourse into cultural consensus.

MERCI.